

ELIOT

A
A
0
0
1
4
0
5
8
9
8
6

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY









ADAM BEDE GIVES A ROSE TO HETTY.

With a sudden impulse of gaiety she did what she had very often done before—stuck the rose in her hair a little above the left ear.

(Adam Bede.)



A · DAY · WITH
GEORGE
ELIOT
BY MAURICE CLARE

From Mayflower (1907-1917)



NEW YORK
HODDER & STOUGHTON

In the same Series.

Thackeray.

Dickens.

Stevenson.

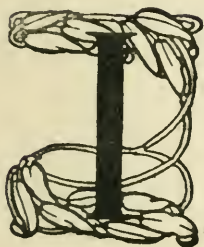
Charlotte Brontë.

Kingsley.

Emerson.

Hawthorne.

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.



It is an October morning in the later 'sixties, bright, bracing, breezy, with sufficient "tang" in the air to justify a fire despite the brilliant sunshine. The London trees have taken on an unmistakable tinge of autumn, and the London gardens have not much to show. That very-much-frequented house, The Priory, in North Bank, Regent's Park, is only now, at eight a.m., opening its eyes awake—or in other words, drawing back its blinds and curtains. Few houses in London, it is said, "have been the scene of stronger and more interesting emotions": but the Priory does not wear its heart upon its sleeve, and nobody would guess from its stolid and reserved exterior that it was a species of Mecca to the "cultured"

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

of all sorts and conditions. For, some fifty years ago, it required, "if not a genuine strength of mind, at any rate a certain amount of 'cussedness' not to be a George Eliotite"; and the authoress of *Adam Bede* was alternately revered as a saint, respected as a sibyl, and regarded as the greatest of living novelists, by her various and multitudinous admirers.

The big, bony, heavy-featured woman, who appears in her own eyes as only capable of "kindling unpleasant sensations, with a palpitating heart and awkward manners," and who is the object of unfaltering, enthusiastic worship on the part of so many friends, comes slowly out of her bedroom into her large study on the first floor, and casts a somewhat deprecating glance upon her writing-table, strewn with papers. In front of this table stands a cast of the Melian *Æsculapius*: it looks at her with a dumbly self-reproachful air, as of one whose skill availed nought to counteract her almost incessant ill-health. The books lying here and there are almost suggestive of their owner's most constant *malaises*,—headache and

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

cold feet: their very titles are oppressive to the average mind. For George Eliot—or Mrs. Lewes, as she is more usually known—is reading aloud to Mr. Lewes, o' nights, such imposing and monumental works as Plato's *Republic*, Nisard's *History of French Literature*, Lecky's *History of Morals*, and Herbert Spencer's *Psychology*; not to mention the consumption of such *hors d'œuvres* and “kickshaws” as the works of Lucretius, Theocritus, Sainte Beuve, Becker's *Charicles*, and a vast variety of minor volumes in five or six different languages. It would be difficult, indeed, to gather, from the ponderous character of her miscellaneous reading that this woman is the creator of such immortal types,—brimming with quaint provincial humour—as Mrs. Poyser (*Adam Bede*) or Aunt Glegg (*Mill on the Floss*). Still more difficult, when you realize, from personal acquaintance with her, the extraordinary seriousness of George Eliot,—the gravity with which, in her eyes, the smallest detail of life is weighted. “The sense of the importance of every action and every word, indeed of every influence which she might exercise over her fellow-creatures . . . the momentous issues of the

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

thoughts and emotions which slowly build up the moral character,"—these have deprived her of that sense of laughter, in ordinary affairs, which is such a help and solace to its possessor. She never says a smile-provoking thing: never writes one in her letters: her vivid and admirable perception of all that makes for gaiety is exclusively confined to her novels. Here she patiently develops her characters in "rather slow but humorous dialogue, such as Shakespeare loved to interpolate in his plays when he chose to show us how the 'Goodman Dull' of the Midlands talked awry." And even here, while allowing that "I have no stock of proverbs in my memory, and there is not one thing put into Mrs. Poyser's mouth which is not fresh from my own mint," she has confessed that "my books are deeply serious things to me, and come out of all the painful discipline, all the most hardly-learned lessons of my past life."

Mr. Lewes enters the study, and they go down to breakfast together. He is in many respects the exact antithesis of George Eliot.

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

Not only do his bright eyes strongly contrast with her pensive, penetrating, grey-blue ones, his long black hair with her abundant masses of auburn-brown ; but his ready wit and urbanity are a singular foil to her somewhat sombre and impressive manner. "A Mirabeau in miniature," she termed him when first they met. They are both, however, of a "lean and hungry aspect."—"Happiness," she has complained, "of which we seem to have more than anyone I know, does not have the effect of making us fat and strong. I often compare ourselves to two mediæval saints painted by a very naïve master." . . . And in the most essential point of all they are alike—deep and devoted mutual affection. "Always exceedingly dependent on some one person for affection and support," George Eliot has found in George Lewes the exact fulfilment of all that most she needs. He is the staff on which she leans for strength, the sympathetic yet expert critic of her work, the tenderest, warmest, of her many devotees. "Without his insight into literary faculty, and his sustaining sympathy, it is doubtful whether she would have produced the writings which have made her fame."

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

And while he regards "Polly" as being at once a supreme genius and the best, most lovable of women, she holds fast by him as the ivy to the oak, and finds that "the affections, instead of being dulled by age, have acquired a stronger activity," — "because," as she has written, "what greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life, to strengthen each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?" And she has exemplified, to the letter, in the course of her life, the theory that "a supreme love, a motive that gives a sublime strength to a woman's life, and exalts habit into partnership with her soul's highest needs, is not to be had how and when she wills: to know that high initiation she must often tread where it is hard to tread, and feel the chill air, and walk through darkness. It is not true that love makes all things easy: it makes us choose what is difficult."

Therefore, although she loves to portray some blessed and perfected union, like that of

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

Adam Bede and Dinah Morris, she has attained, perhaps, her highest note in the delineation of love that finds its goal in abnegation, surrender and self-sacrifice,—love that is crowned by death. In Maggie, of *The Mill on the Floss*,—Maggie, in whose wild, passionate, unconventional nature George Eliot consciously or unconsciously incorporated much of herself,—she has reached the final outcome of her own belief that “the most difficult heroism is that which consists in the daily conquests of our private demons, not in the slaying of world-notorious dragons.”

And it is just because Maggie Tulliver is presented to us as, for all her splendid courage, so very human a creature, that she remains, and probably will remain, one of the best-beloved memories in the whole great realm of fiction. About her there is nothing “icily regular, faultlessly null”: quite the contrary. “If the ethics of art,” George Eliot has declared, “do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble, but liable to great error—error that is anguish to its own

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

nobleness—then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond to a widening psychology.” . . Yet “the art which leaves the soul in despair is laming to the soul, and is denounced by the healthy sentiment of an entire community.” So she has set Maggie Tulliver, in the extreme of her sorrow and perplexity, upon an immortal pinnacle, above the placid and complacent flood of the ordinary “happy ending.” And her record closes, not to the tintinnabulation of wedding bells, but to the roar and rush of flooding waters, in that final conflict when “there was at least this fruit from all her years of striving after the highest and the best,—that her soul, though betrayed, beguiled, ensnared, could never deliberately consent to a choice of the lower.” . .

And thus we see her, momentarily re-united with her old comrade and playmate, as the mill-house crumbles in the flood. . . . “‘Alone, Maggie?’ said Tom in a voice of deep astonishment, as he opened the middle window on a level

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

with the boat. 'Yes, Tom. God has taken care of me, to bring me to you. Get in quickly.'

. . . .

And we must needs recognise and "love the highest when we see it," on learning, almost with relief, the immediately-following solution of Maggie's bitter problems of existence: "Brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted, living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love." (*The Mill on the Floss.*)

. . . . Breakfast over, the novelist reads awhile, as is her wont, in her Bible: a large-print volume has recently been given her by Mr. Lewes; her abnormally long-sighted eyes are beginning to show the strain of thirty-five years' laborious study. For you must understand that George Eliot is not, has never been, the facile scribe of light-hearted irresponsible fiction. She has taken up novel-writing comparatively late in life, at about forty years of age,—and then only in deference to the wish and advice of Mr. Lewes. It does not come naturally to

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

her, either ; it is always a harassing experience. "I could no more live through one of my books," she declares, "a second time, than I can live through last year again." Self-distrust, dejection, depression, despondency, assail her the whole length of the way throughout a story. "The self-questioning whether my nature will be able to meet the heavy demands upon it, both of personal duty and intellectual production, bears upon me almost continually, in a way that prevents me ever from tasting the quiet joy I might have had in the *work done*. Buoyancy and exultation, I fancy, are out of the question when one has lived as long as I have." . . . No : she is first and foremost a student. The first work she ever thought of writing, when still quite young, was "a synopsis of ecclesiastical history, demanding nothing but great learning, clear thought, and untiring industry and ingenuity." As translator, as editor, as coadjutor to Lewes in his most onerous literary tasks, she has still "kept the force and flower of her mind for philosophy," still always yearned, at the back of her thoughts, after the entirely abstract and purely metaphysical. And although she has, "during

MAGGIE TULLIVER RESCUES TOM AT THE MILL.

“Alone, Maggie?” said Tom in a voice of deep astonishment, as he opened the middle window on a level with the boat.

“Yes, Tom. God has taken care of me, to bring me to you. Get in quickly.”

(The Mill on the Floss.)



A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

a long and studious youth, received impressions of persons, of scenes, of books," and has "travelled and enriched her store,"—so that she is able to set down bygone impressions with amazing accuracy of detail,—as in *Scenes of Clerical Life*,—yet she is rarely able to assimilate what one may call life up-to-date. She "never lives in the open": she is kept in cotton-wool seclusion and safety, so far as may be, from all adverse influences. She has no experience of active business: all her affairs are transacted for her: the taste of the present, active, living, workaday world has not entered her life these many years. She must depend entirely upon her marvellous memory, with its wealth of detail, for all her finest work: and where that memory cannot be utilised, as in *Romola*,—when she has only imagination and erudition to fall back upon,—she is utterly exhausted by the effort. "I began *Romola* a young woman," she sighs, "I finished it an old woman. . . Great facts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly."

There, in a few words, you have the secret of George Eliot's genius. The student, the

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

philosopher, the recluse, writes novels as a medium might. "My stories grow in me like plants," she has avowed,—that is, without her direct knowledge or volition. "It almost seems as if her mind had been intended more as an instrument for interpreting the minds of others, more as a phonograph through the agency of which the natures of all the various interlocutors with whom she met could be delicately registered and made to report themselves to the world, than as a distinct organ of her own taste and purpose. . . . There is hardly a country squire or dairymaid or poacher or inn-keeper or country lad or lass to whom George Eliot does not give a thoroughly individual voice." And where she speaks in her own voice, it is not that of a romancist at all. It is the accent of one whose mission, as she conceives it, has been "to paint the lives of those she saw about her, to describe their joys and sorrows, their successes and failures, and, by insisting on the deep importance of this world, to teach us to hinder as little as possible the good which is lingering around us." Or, in her own words, "My books are a form of utterance deliberately, carefully con-

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

structed on a basis which seen in my doubting mind is never shaken by a doubt . . . my conviction as to the relative goodness and nobleness of human dispositions and motives. And the inspiring principle which alone gives me courage to write is that of so presenting our human life as to help my readers in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence. . . . We ought each of us not to sit down and wait, but to be heroic and constructive if possible. . . .”

Now, by a curious paradox, this serious and learned woman has revealed in her tales—most likely without knowing it—the real reason of her abnormal gravity,—and the true source of her superabundant sympathy. In the same manner as those artists usually draw children most successfully, who have none of their own, so George Eliot—admirable and beloved step-mother as she is to Mr. Lewes’s three boys—has never known the prattle of little voices, of children waking like small birds in the early

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

morning. She has never heard the headlong pattering of tiny feet upon a nursery floor. In a word, she has been denied the chief function and supreme joy of womanhood,—and for that very cause, perhaps, she can delineate childhood with a sweetness of touch, an accuracy of rendering, which are only comparable to the canvases of Sir Joshua, and which are never for an instant strained, incongruous, or otherwise than exquisitely right and true. Hardly a story she has ever achieved but contains one or more of these delicious little chubby, rosy figures : time fails to enumerate them. Perhaps the most charmingly conceived, the most carefully reproduced of all, is the little Eppie in *Silas Marner*. This tale, which “contains all her merits in high perfection, concentrated by the narrow limits in which the work is enclosed,” and which is intended to “set in a strong light influences of pure, natural, human relations,” contains this unrivalled study of infancy. Very few mothers could have conveyed, so deftly, so delicately, the infinite gradations of growth in the child, coupled with the correspondent growth in the case-hardened, lonely old man. Almost as actual spectators of the process, we see how

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

“As her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness ;” until, as months lengthen out to years, it becomes clear that “Eppie, with her short, toddling steps, must lead Father Silas a pretty dance on any fine morning when circumstances favoured mischief. . . He had wisely chosen a broad strip of linen as a means of fastening her to his loom when he was busy. . . Having cut the linen strip in a manner jagged but effectual, in two minutes she had run out at the open door, where the sunshine was inviting her, while poor Silas believed her to be a better child than usual.”

There is, in short, hardly any one of George Eliot's tales in which this tender delight in children is not manifested : nor are the little creatures only included to heighten the effect of a situation : they take a normal and relevant part, just as in real life. And one is enabled to guess what Marian Evans might once have been, — the joyful mother, united at all points with her little ones,—had she never become

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

George Eliot, the famous writer, courted, adulated, flattered—but always with a secret void in her deep and womanly heart.

After half-an-hour's reading of the Bible the novelist turns to her correspondence, which is voluminous, and entails considerable toil. Constantly in communication as she is with so many well-known folks and personal acquaintances, she undertakes, according to the habit of the time, letters of what might seem inordinate and unnecessary length. And, strange to say, they more than ever confirm the idea that she is merely a medium for the production of her imaginative work. For these private letters, set down in her exquisite handwriting, with hardly an error or erasure, are but poor compared to her published writings—stilted, artificial, and monotonous in manner, with an air of intending great things and coming extremely short of them. They are almost tedious—and compare most unfavourably with the impressiveness of her spoken words, which, uttered in low, vibrating, musical tones, have thrilled so many eager listeners. Yet undoubtedly she

SILAS MARNER AT HIS LOOM.

He had wisely chosen a broad strip of linen as a means of fastening her to his loom when he was busy.

(Silas Marner.)





A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

enjoys this part of her morning ; and it is with a certain reluctance that she puts away these more personal outpourings, and, lying back in a comfortable chair, with a high support to her feet, starts work upon a manuscript placed upon her knees. "In this way," she has just written to a friend, "I get advantage from the longsightedness which involves the early use of glasses. . . But it is vain to get one's back and knees in the right attitude, if one's mind is superannuated. Some time or other, if death does not come to silence me, there ought to be deliberate abstinence from writing—self-judgment which decides that one has no more to say."

This last phrase throws a suggestive light upon the morbid self-introspection which hinders her at the very outset of a new book and haunts her throughout. The brooding tendency of her mind, which bids her perpetually "look before and after, and sigh for what is not"—yet without any very definite notion of what might be better worth having, is intensified by almost constant ill-health : "I could have done much

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

more," she says, "if I had been well : but that regret applies to most years of my life." And a vague yearning towards something lost or lacking is discernible in all she does,—whether expressed in dim desire towards realms unattainable, as in the plaintive verses from the *Spanish Gypsy*,—

“ Spring comes hither,
 Buds the rose,
Roses wither,
 Sweet spring goes.
Ojalá, would she carry me !

“ Summer soars,
 Wide-winged day
White light pours,
 Flies away,
Ojalá, would he carry me !

“ South winds blow,
 Westward borne,
Onward go
 Toward the morn,
Ojalá, would they carry me !

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

“ Sweet birds sing
 O’er the graves,
 Then take wing
 O’er the waves,
Ojalá, would they carry me ! ”

—or in that characteristic *sotto-voce* burden of sadness which underlies her finest achievements, —that “pitying study of man, in the frame of mind of one who is determined to make the best of a bad business,” that “subdued tone of regret that the highest human endeavour is destined to be baffled.” These symptoms of inherent pessimism are not, perhaps, so noticeable in *Adam Bede* as elsewhere. She has declared herself thankful to have written so true a book as *Adam Bede*: and indeed, it contains a wider diapason of emotion, besides a happier realisation of the joy of life, than her other volumes. No one can obliterate from memory, once having read, the charming picture of Hetty Sorrel, young, childish, and coquettish, as she appears in the earlier chapters—the scene in the dairy, for instance, with Arthur Donnithorne, or that in the garden

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

among the currant bushes, when, given a rose by the gigantic Adam, "Hetty took the rose . . . and with a sudden impulse of gaiety she did what she had very often done before—stuck the rose in her hair a little above the left ear. The tender admiration in Adam's face was slightly shadowed by reluctant disapproval." . . .

These delicate and enchanting little episodes of country life throw into darker relief such scenes—no less veracious—as that where the betrayed and deserted Hetty, a poor little butterfly with broken wings, contemplates an end of herself in the wintry pool. "She set down her basket, and then . . . sat still, looking at the pool. . . There was no need to hurry—there was all the night to drown herself in."

The priceless gift of sympathy, George Eliot's chief claim to real greatness, is, in *Adam Bede*, revealed at its fullest. "Creation," as she has put it, "is the super-added life of the intellect ; sympathy, all-embracing love, the

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

super-added moral life. . . Sympathy, the one poor word which includes all our best insight and all our best love." Assuredly in this poignant sympathy lies the secret of her success: for she contrives to enlist our own most sympathetic feelings for every one of her *dramatis personae* in turn. The fact that the story of Hetty was a true one: that in Adam Bede himself she was delineating her own father, and in Dinah Morris her aunt, may have lent additional strength of characterisation to George Eliot's hand in this particular book. But sympathy, it may be said, is her gospel of life: the only gospel which her negative creed confesses. For, although she has passed through the Christian experience, and maintained throughout her life a grave and reverent regard for it: though the *Imitation of Christ* is her life-long companion,—George Eliot is not a nominal or professing Christian. Presumably, if obliged to affix a label to her opinion, she would style herself a Positivist. She feels a "yearning affection towards the great religions of the world which have reflected the struggles and the needs of mankind." And she repudiates the idea of having no beliefs of her own.

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

“I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no faith. . . I care only to know if possible the last meaning that lies in all religious doctrines from the beginning till now.” The true Christian ideal she upholds as the noblest pattern that man can follow. But of individual immortality she has no hope: and this blank outlook towards the eternal future throws a melancholy shadow over every output of her mind. To her, “it is a pang to witness the suffering of a fellow-creature, and I feel his suffering the more because he is mortal, because his life is so short, and I would have it if possible filled with happiness and not misery. In some minds the deep pathos lying in the thought of human mortality—that we are here for a little while and then vanish away—that this earthly life is all that is given to our loved ones, and to many suffering fellowmen—lies nearer the fountains of moral emotion than the conception of extended existence.” So that her sole residuum of what once was a practical working Christianity, the only religion which can be distinctly attributed to this gifted but dissatisfied woman, is “the

HETTY SORREL AT THE POOL.

She set down her basket and then . . . sat still, looking at the pool. . . There was no need to hurry—there was all the night to drown herself in.

(Adam Bede.)



A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

expression of the sense of human fellowship with an influence strong enough to compel us to live for others, even though it be beneath the in-coming shadow of an endless night."

This "sense of human fellowship" runs like a silver thread through *Middlemarch*, the novel upon which she is now tentatively engaged. It is the very key to the lovable mistakes and noble loyalties of Dorothea, perhaps the best portrait in all George Eliot's gallery of sweet and noble women: the gallant little Mary Garth is actuated by it throughout. You will find it gleaming here and there with pleasant lustre, across all those studies of English lower middle-class life, and of Midland farmers and tradesmen, which are "hardly surpassed in English literature." It is, indeed, one may say, the message of all George Eliot's authorship. Excellent as her plots are, subtly drawn as her abundant detail may be, they are subordinated to the sense of human interdependence: for, as she says, "The older the world gets, originality becomes less possible. Great subjects are used up, and civilization tends evermore to

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

repress individual predominance, highly-wrought agony, or ecstatic joy. But all the gentle emotions will be ever new, ever wrought up into more and more lovely combinations. . . . No mind that has any real life is a mere echo of emotion. If the perfect music comes occasionally, as in music, it ought to harmonize. It is like a diffusion or expansion of one's own life, to be assured that its vibrations are repeated in another."

About noon Mr. Lewes appears, solicitous as to "Polly's" overdoing herself, and wishful, according to his wont, to hear what she has written this morning. Holding the MS. in her thin, transparent, beautifully-shaped hands, and giving it the full benefit of her rich voice and exquisite elocution, she reads aloud to him some forty or fifty pages. "The best work you have yet done," he reassures her, catching her anxious and expectant gaze as she awaits his critical verdict. "You sometimes imagine," he adds, "that you are falling off in power : but I say you are mellowing and maturing. This

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

Middlemarch strikes me as being the ripened, perfected fruit of your genius."

Her face lights up with its grave smile, and her blue eyes brighten. "Well, it ought to be!" she answers. "I think this year's end finds me enjoying existence more than ever I did before, in spite of the loss of youth. Study is a keener delight to me than ever. All knowledge, all thought, all achievement, seems more precious and enjoyable to me than ever it was before in life. Besides, the world is so intensely interesting!"

"You have helped to make it so," says Mr. Lewes rather grimly. "Some folks would say exactly the reverse."

"It is a world of struggle and endeavour, of course," she admits, "and we have had a hard fight, up-hill, up-hill all the way. But also we seem to have attained more than our due share of happiness and prosperity: and I should be vilely ungrateful if I did not attempt to tender back something to life of all that it has yielded me. I always want to feel that my

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

work is something,—however small, — which wanted to be done in this world, and that I am just the organ for that little bit of work.”

“Little bit of work, indeed!” and he kisses her lips into silence. The lunch-bell rings, and they leave the study hand-in-hand. He has been in his own study all morning, hard at work upon abstruse and comparatively unpopular books: for, as he cheerfully grumbles, mere philosophy can never compete with fiction.

In the afternoon, after a short rest, George Eliot goes round the garden and surveys with mild regret the relics of departed summer. It is strange how completely she, a countrywoman born and bred, steeped in the provincialism of the shires, has become acclimatized and assimilated to London life. Occasionally she longs for “a house with some shade and grass close round it,” of a different calibre from the shade and grass of St. John’s Wood; but this is a very transient longing: she is to all intents and purposes a Londoner. And to open-air nature in general, may be, she has no very ardent attachment. Wonderfully as she

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

can paint it in a few strong lines or broad washes, it is to the concrete human being, rather than to the abstract landscape element in a scene, that her main interest is attracted. And although for animals she has a kindly eye, and especially for horses and dogs,—there is a canine favourite in nearly all her tales, treated in a friendly, sympathetic manner,—yet they play a very subordinate rôle in the unfolding of the great human drama wrought out upon some small provincial stage.

She goes indoors to her big double drawing-room, entering by the long low window which opens into the garden. The room is decorated by Owen Jones, and all around upon the walls hang Leighton's illustrations to *Romola*. In the further part of it stands the grand piano, her solace and chief joy, and she sits down for an hour's good practice. George Eliot sets music above all things : she has a passionate devotion to it such as no words can express. About eighteen of Beethoven's Sonatas, which she performs with fine power and taste, are included in her répertoire : and she specially

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

delights in Schubert's songs. When outworn through the palpitation and excitement which frequently accrue during the completion of a novel, she seeks refuge and healing in waves of lovely sound : and though she rarely plays before visitors, she loves to hear great music rendered by some of the many habitués of her Sunday afternoons. Music is a potent factor in many of her books,—it is always alluded to with a peculiar pleasure : whether Stephen and Lucy, in *The Mill on the Floss*, join in the charming strains of “ Graceful Consort,”—and the author observes that “ the sense of mutual fitness that springs from the two deep notes fulfilling expectation just at the right moment, between the notes of the silvery soprano, from the peaceful accord of descending thirds, . . . is likely to supersede any immediate demand for less impassioned forms of agreement,”—or whether, as in the touching pathos of *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, the little boy and the grown man are spell-bound by the heroine's sudden restoration to song.

“ Ozzy, roaming about the room in quest of a forbidden pleasure, came to the harpsichord,

MAYNARD GILFIL HEARS CATERINA SINGING.

In a moment her fingers were wandering with their old sweet method among the keys, and her soul was floating in its true familiar element of delicious sound. . . Maynard thanked God.

(Mr. Gilfil's Love Story.)



A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

and struck the handle of his whip on a deep bass note. The vibration rushed through Caterina like an electric shock : it seemed as if at that instant a new soul were entering into her, and filling her with a deeper, more significant life. She looked round, rose from the sofa, and walked to the harpsichord. In a moment her fingers were wandering with their old sweet method among the keys, and her soul was floating in its true familiar element of delicious sound. . . Maynard thanked God. An active power was reawakened, and must make a new epoch in Caterina's recovery. Presently there were low liquid notes blending themselves with the harder tones of the instrument, and gradually the pure voice swelled into predominance."

"There are stores laid up in our human nature," so George Eliot has written, "that one's understanding can make no inventory of" : and most opulent of these treasures is the storehouse of perfect music.

Presently guests begin to arrive,—devotees to her shrine. This is not the chief occasion

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

of their advent, being a week-day : George Eliot's Sunday-afternoon receptions are famous throughout the length and breadth of London, when, "sometimes preceded by a small and early dinner with chosen friends," a continuous flow of company sets in. All the choicest artistic and literary spirits of the 'sixties are to be encountered there : sometimes, as Frederic Harrison has described these memorable meetings, "the superb Frederic Leighton would drop in, or the hearty Robert Browning, with endless anecdotes and happy *mots* ; George Meredith, the inexhaustible, and the *mitis sapientia* of Lecky ; the first Lord Acton, the omnivorous student ; the gentle irony of Charles Bowen, and the second Lord Lytton, the cosmopolitan courtier ; the jolly rattle of Anthony Trollope ; the ever-welcome and genial Lord Houghton ; Lord and Lady Amberley, in spite of her mother's frowns ; that most thoughtful of painters, Frederic Burton ; and that gentle, modest, and cultured poet, Leicester Warren, last Lord de Tabley. . . George du Maurier would sing one of his exquisite comic French songs, or G. Lewes and Edward Pigott would

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

act an impromptu charade, with witty dialogue invented on the spur of the moment."

And yet George Eliot is "eminently *not* a typical mistress of a *salon*:" it has always been "difficult for her mentally, to move from one person to another": she has seldom "found the effort of entertaining compensated by the gain." She has relied almost entirely upon the admirable hospitality, brilliant wit and never-failing kindness of Mr. Lewes to sustain the burden—for burden she has often felt it—of these immensely successful gatherings. The versatility, vivacity and resource of Mr. Lewes, who is "as good in a company of three as of thirty," has supplied every social quality in which Mrs. Lewes felt herself lacking.

But to-day she sits in her low arm-chair at the left-hand side of the fire, and, looking up with her grave yet cordial smile, receives some welcome visitor, and beckons him to the chair beside her. Bending her majestic head, after her whole body, eagerly forward, she plunges into animated conversation, exercising a

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

strange fascination over the hearer with her low, deep, thrillingly tender tones, and with the tremendous reserve power that one feels to be latent behind her sympathetic sayings. "Ideas," she has said, "are often poor guests: our sun-filled eyes cannot discern them, they pass athwart us in thin vapour, and cannot make themselves felt. But sometimes they are made flesh . . . they touch us with soft responsive hands, they look at us with sad sincere eyes, and speak to us in appealing tones; they are clothed in a living human soul, with all its conflicts, its faith and its love. Then their presence is a power, then they shake us like a passion, and we are drawn after them with gentle compulsion, as flame is drawn to flame" (*Janet's Repentance*). Upon young men especially, she has a motherly, magnetic influence, which at times assumes a half-divine effect: they treasure up each sentence dropped from her lips, each glance of her penetrating eyes. As one of these has written down his recollections: "She appeared much greater than her books. Her ability seemed to shrink beside her moral grandeur. She was not only the best, but the cleverest woman you had ever met.

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

You never dared to speak to her of her books : her personality was so much more impressive than its product."

Yet this magnificent personality is housed in a weak and failing frame : and when the last visitor has departed, the great authoress is racked with a blinding headache, and shivering with stone-cold feet. She takes a brisk turn out-of-doors in the cool October starlight, well muffled up, on Mr. Lewes' arm : the crisp and pleasant night is full of healing power. Refreshed and invigorated, yet healthfully drowsy, she returns home and sits down for a few minutes' meditation before addressing herself to sleep. "I should like," she murmurs with half-closed eyes, "to take long doses of *dolce far niente*, and be in no hurry about anything in this 'varsal world. Do we not commit ourselves to sleep and so resign all care for ourselves every night—lay ourselves gently on the bosom of nature and God?"

She endeavours to put away all tired attempts towards mental activity—yet, in spite

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

of herself, her fancy obstinately insists on recurring to those poems which have occupied so much of her time and thought of late,—*The Spanish Gypsy*, to wit, and *Jubal*. Hardly can she be termed a poet in the highest sense ; she is the poet made, not born ; her verse is constructed, not inspired ; it is deficient in fire, passion, melody ; yet there is an amount of “fundamental brain-work” about it which will ensure its survival when more sensuously-beautiful strains have perished.

She takes up from the bedside-table her constant companion, the *Imitation of Christ* : that “chronicle,” as she has called it, “written down by the hands that waited for the heart’s prompting ; a solitary, hidden anguish, struggle, trust and triumph, — not written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are still treading with bleeding feet on the stones : it remains a lasting record of human needs and human consolations, it works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness, while expensive sermons and records, newly issued, leave all things as they were before.” She

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

turns the well-worn leaves with loving reverence, and the sublime ideal there upheld sinks deep into her weary consciousness. "*Let the same mind be in you as was also in Christ Jesus.*" "I believe," whispers the woman who cannot profess or call herself a Christian, "the answer to this will be uttered more and more fervently among all posterities for evermore." And, stretching out towards nebulous heights of aspiration where she may yet attain to some hint of that Divine Likeness, she hears her own lines, running noble as the sweep and surge of some wide river,—a current upon which she drifts into the Debateable Lands this side of profound oblivion.

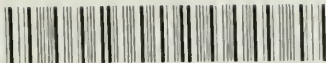
"O, may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self.
. May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,

A DAY WITH GEORGE ELIOT.

Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty—
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense,
So shall I join the choir invisible,
Whose music is the gladness of the world.”



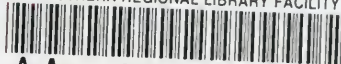




3 1205 00634 1190

RDB

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A A

001 405 898

6

